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Articles



Books



Projects



Videos



Blog



Contact

79 Lessons From the Golden Calf

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This week we read about the original golden calf. Many have compared the cult-like worship of masks, medical products dubiously referred to as vaccines, and establishment "experts" to the golden calf. This comparison is more apt than people realize.

We tend to look down on ancient idolaters as primitive fools. They were nothing of the sort. Idolatry was deeply intertwined with the prevailing science and philosophy of the times, and its proponents were intellectually sophisticated. Those who believe that people today are intellectually advanced compared to the people of ancient times are sorely mistaken. We compare favorably to them only in the realm of technology, and only because we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. Intellectually, religiously, and morally we have nothing to brag about.

The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim writes at length about ancient idolatry, based on their own books. The dominant belief at the time was that celestial bodies controlled the world, and Man's survival depended on worshipping nature. They believed that physical idols could draw power from these celestial bodies to influence world events or give people prophetic dreams. They built temples for their presumed life-preserving rituals, offered sacrifices, planted idolatrous trees to draw power from the stars, and committed immoral acts while planting fields.

Idolatrous practices were outlined in scientific books about nature and agriculture. Science and idolatry were one and the same. Challenging idolatry was synonymous with challenging established science; it was considered a threat to public health and safety, and dealt with accordingly.

The Rambam explains in great detail that a high percentage of *mitzvos* in the Torah were given specifically to counter this and other false ideologies. Anything that smacked of idolatry or nature-worship was strictly prohibited, and the Jews were given positive commandments to do the exact opposite of the prevailing "science".

They were also warned that engaging in these presumed life-preserving practices would only have the opposite effect. Idolatry would lead to plague, drought, famine, poverty, death, and destruction. Keeping the Torah - doing the polar opposite of the "science" of the time - would bring rain, prosperity, health, and protection.

This was demonstrated over and over again in real life as the nation vacillated between keeping the Torah and idolatry, but it never really clicked. Old habits die hard, especially when it means going against the majority. People will suffer almost anything to be accepted.

With this introduction in mind, let's examine the story of the golden calf.

Moshe ascended Har Sinai to receive the Torah, and was supposed to return after forty days. Due to a misunderstanding of when the clock started ticking, the Jews believed the forty days had passed and Moshe was gone. The Erev Rav declared that Moshe was dead, and the Jews needed an immediate replacement to lead them. This replacement needed to be an intermediary between the Jews and God, just as Moshe was.

This replacement needed to be an idol.

The commentators all grapple with how the Jewish people, who had experienced the highest degree of human revelation just forty days ago, could fashion a golden calf and declare "This is the God that took you out of Egypt." The very idea is ludicrous. How could anyone believe that an idol that was minutes old did anything for them in the past?

When we understand what idolatry really was, it's far more sensible. The Jews still believed in God and everything that had happened. The golden calf was intended not to replace God, but to draw His power down into the world. This was an entirely accepted belief, one they had grown up with and experienced all their lives. In a time of crisis, it was natural to fall back on these deeply ingrained ideas, which they had only recently been taught to oppose.

So the first important comparison between the present situation and the golden calf is that in a time of uncertainty or crisis, people will naturally follow the most familiar, comfortable path.

This brings us to the next parallel. In hindsight, it is obvious to us that worshiping the golden calf was incredibly foolish. How could it be that the *dor de'ah*, the most enlightened generation of Jews, could so quickly succumb to such folly?

The answer is fear. When people are afraid they do not think rationally, and they will take extreme actions to assuage their fears - often at the expense of everything else. A day earlier the notion of worshiping a golden calf would have been preposterous, but once the Jews were afraid they immediately panicked and rushed to do it.

Compare to the current situation. In hindsight, when sanity is restored to the human race, people will look back and wonder how so many people could have behaved so foolishly. We are not the most enlightened generation, but no generation has been more educated and had greater access to information. Yet so many intelligent people quickly turned into hysterical zombies, taking extreme actions at the expense of everything else - just to assuage their fears. The outcome will be no better than what the golden calf turned out to be.

The third parallel is directly linked to the fear and panic. The Jews could not wait an extra moment to create the golden calf. What would have been the big deal to sleep on it, organize a panel to debate the pros and cons of the idea, and have a committee investigate if they counted the forty days correctly?

No. They had to create the golden calf *now*. Why? Because it was a matter of life and death. If Moshe was dead, then creating a replacement was an urgent need. It was an emergency situation. Otherwise they might die of thirst and hunger, or from the elements, or from the snakes and scorpions in the desert, or from an attack by enemies. It was a choice between creating a golden calf or the extinction of the Jewish people.

If only they could have calmed down, deliberated, and waited a few more hours, we would have been spared thousands of years of suffering that continues to this day. If only they could have realized that being calm and deliberating was actually a third valid choice.

Today there is the same phenomenon. We are being relentlessly urged that if we don't take an experimental "vaccine" today we will die a horrible death from covid tomorrow and bring down the rest of humanity with us. There is no time to think or deliberate. No decent person who cares about human life would dare think and deliberate, we are told. This is an emergency! It's a war on covid! Either you are a friend or you are a foe!

This leads to several more parallels. We would imagine that the suggestion to create a golden calf was quite controversial at the time. There were many righteous Jews who opposed the idea, and quite likely a healthy majority that was seriously disturbed by the idea

even if they were unsure. How did the idolaters succeed in pushing the idea through so quickly and without opposition?

First of all, they engaged in brutal censorship. No less than Hur, the son of Miriam, objected to the idea, and they murdered him. We might have expected the righteous Jews to immediately rise up and avenge his death, but just the opposite occurred. They acquiesced. They were intimidated. The good guys lacked strong leadership and were unsure of themselves, while the bad guys were organized and determined. This enabled the bad guys to easily prevail, even though they were an extreme minority pushing a radical agenda. They made an example of Hur, no one else dared confront them, and the idolaters conquered the masses just like that.

This describes the current situation to a tee.

Next the Erev Rav idolaters needed to convince the masses to join them. This was a big change. The fear was powerful, but so was the inner turmoil about worshipping a golden calf. The Jews needed reassurance that it was okay, that it was more than okay, that it was the greatest idea.

The idolaters knew exactly what to do. They approached Aharon, the Kohen Gadol, and made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Aharon played along, hoping to buy time until Moshe returned, but was unsuccessful. His participation provided critical legitimacy, a de facto rabbinic stamp of approval that no one would dare challenge.

The same propaganda tactic was vital to get religious Jews on board with the golden calf of today. Establishment rabbis have abused their positions and the public trust to become spokesmen for idolatrous behavior. One wonders what offers the purveyors of the golden calf made these rabbis, and if they were even slightly tempted to refuse. Considering the shallowness, deceit, and bullying that pervades the rabbinic pronouncements, it seems they needed little encouragement to jump on the bandwagon. At least Aharon tried to slow it down.

There was no classical Torah debate that covered the various sides of the issue in depth. These establishment rabbis have not been made to respond to serious questions. The public was simply bombarded with declarations from so-called "leading rabbis" (a propaganda term that has never been defined), and the social pressure took on a life of its own from there.

This brings us to the sixth parallel. It wasn't enough to just make the golden calf kosher, or even a religious obligation. They needed to eliminate any nagging reservations people might have harbored about worshipping it. After all, the Jews understood that if they got this wrong, they were going to be in very big trouble with God.

The Erev Rav needed to make it fun.

Party time! Music, dancing, an ecstatic celebration! The idolaters wore down people's moral reservations with fear, they nudged them forward with peer pressure, and they eliminated the last bit of hesitation by replacing the fear with ecstasy. How they manipulated people's emotions to drag them down from the greatest of heights to the lowest of depths!

In present times we have seen exactly the same methods of manipulation. How can it be that so many people would line up to get injected with an experimental drug and not display the slightest concern? Even if they were convinced by the "science", the "experts", and the "rabbis" that it was safe, there is still so much that is unknown and no recourse if something goes wrong. How could any reasonable person not be even a little nervous?

Not only are they not nervous, they are ecstatic. They are high. The Erev Rav have turned an experimental medical procedure with grave risks into a big fun party. After a relentless diet of fear, everyone wants to join a big fun party. The doctors are dancing. The

libations are flowing. Everyone is celebrating. How can this golden calf *not* be a good thing? Who would want to spoil the fun by *worrying*?

As the Rambam explains in Moreh Nevuchim, ancient idolaters convinced parents to sacrifice their children to Molech in exactly the same way. The prevailing science of the time was that a child needed to be offered so that the other children would be protected. A mother's natural instinct is to fight like a tiger to protect her child. The idolaters used fear to wear down her natural instinct and actually corrupt it; destroying her child was the best way to protect her children. The idolatrous priests played loud music to replace the last vestiges of hesitation with celebration, while also drowning out the screams of the child being sacrificed. Instead of fighting like tigers, the mothers folded like paper tigers.

Today we see the same tactics being used to convince pregnant women to get injected with an experimental drug, no questions asked. A pregnant woman by nature constantly obsesses over doing whatever is best for her baby. She won't take the slightest chance. But scare her enough and turn up the music, and this primary survival instinct can be corrupted.

The seventh and final parallel somehow escapes even "very religious" Jews. Where is the connection to God in all this? The Jews in the desert were facing what they believed to be an existential crisis. Moshe was seemingly gone, and they had to decide whether or not to worship a golden calf. Why did they not break their hearts, examine their ways, and cry out to God for guidance? The Jews were blessed to have real prophets among them. They could have sought a message from God, but they did not.

In the span of a few hours they went from fear and confusion to utter certainty that God wanted them to make a golden calf. They imposed their will on God, then claimed it was exactly what God wanted them to do.

Nothing has changed today. We lack prophets, and rabbinic guidance has unfortunately become unreliable in our generation, but we see no effort on the part of the average Jew to seek guidance from God in this time of confusion. Instead, we see them imposing their will on God - or simply kowtowing to others who do this on their behalf - and then claim that this is God's will. God wants them to serve the golden calf, and this is the only way God will save them. God gave them the golden calf as a blessing just for this purpose, and will only save those who worship it. Everyone else is a heretic and a danger to society.

The following day Moshe descended, the party came to an abrupt end, and the entire nation faced annihilation. In the aftermath of the golden calf episode we can be confident that the people declared "Never again!" Never again would they behave so foolishly. Never again would they fall prey to sinister propaganda and diabolical schemes to erode their defenses.

Of course, their descendants created two more golden calves that were worshiped for generations, and idolatry filled the land of Israel until it was destroyed. Most people just refuse to learn from history, and they become outraged at those who observe the same warning signs repeating themselves. How dare we say it's happening again? That's disrespectful to the people who went through it. Of course, just the opposite is true. Dismissing the warning signs is the greatest slap in the face to those who lost everything just so we could be here and learn from them.

King Menashe was one of the greatest idolaters, before repenting in his later years. Many centuries later Rav Ashi, one of the editors of the Talmud, made a disrespectful remark about him to his students. That night Menashe appeared to him in a dream and demonstrated his vast superiority in Torah knowledge to Rav Ashi. Rav Ashi asked Menashe how someone so wise could have served idolatry. Menashe retorted: "Had you been there, you would have grabbed the edge of my garment and run after me." Rav Ashi was chastened and thenceforth spoke of Menashe with respect. (Sanhedrin 102B)

Who among us is greater than Rav Ashi? Who among us, for that matter, is greater than Menashe?

Chazal teach us that the temptation to serve idols has been destroyed (Sanhedrin 64A). Nevertheless, the temptation to find substitutes for God remains unaffected, and the psychology behind idolatry is as strong as ever.

It is easy to scoff at those who served idols, engaged in bizarre rituals, and even murdered their own children "for the greater good"...but are so many of us not doing much the same? We are not really more advanced and intellectually sophisticated than our predecessors; we pale to them in so many ways. The people worshiping needles, masks, experts, the media, the "leading rabbis", the hype, the fear, the propaganda, the peer pressure are serving a golden calf. Technically they are not worshiping idols, which is a capital crime, but they have succumbed to exactly the same spiritual and moral demons. In a desperate, panic-driven attempt to save themselves and others, they are actually destroying themselves and others.

As in ancient times, serving idols only brought the opposite of what people hoped to achieve. Every time it backfired, the people doubled down and hoped that *this* time it would bring salvation. Today people continue to get strung along the failed path of idolatrous behavior, moving the goalposts and intensifying the worship as the situation continues to deteriorate. It's time to get off the merry-go-round and really turn to God.

One final lesson. Chazal teach us that instead of punishing the Jews in one shot for serving the golden calf, which would have destroyed the nation, God let them pay back their debt on the installment plan. The worst violaters were killed immediately, and the rest of the nation gets a little extra added on to every punishment to slowly expiate the ancient sin.

While this was most generous to those who served the golden calf, it seems quite unfair to all those who came after them. Why should we have to get punished for other people's sins? Why should we have to pay back their debt?

The answer is also found in this week's *parsha*, when Hashem taught Moshe the 13 attributes. Hashem only holds children partially accountable for the sins of their ancestors when they follow the same evil ways. It follows that we can only continue to get punished for the original sin of the golden calf if we continue to follow the same idolatrous path.

Considering the numerous striking comparisons between the present situation and ancient times, it seems much of the nation is doing just that. Much of our nation, even those who are "religious", have allowed their minds to be corrupted by Erev Rav. They have seen Menashe running to serve idolatry, grabbed his garment, and begged him to take them along.

They have put all their hope and faith in evil, deceitful, godless people and their golden needles, and convinced themselves that this is exactly what God wants them to do. They have turned against their brothers and sisters who express hesitation, let alone opt out completely, and bared their teeth with murderous rage.

They have allowed their moral principles to become eroded, and what would have been unthinkable just a short time ago they now believe to be a *mitzvah*. The public good, as defined by godless people, has become the new god. The Torah has nothing further to say on the subject, except to follow along and follow orders. There is no room for doubt, or dissent, or how our sages taught us for thousands of years to respond to plagues and crises. Raise the music and drown out the screams. We're saving lives.

I'm far from perfect, and pale to my ancestors, but I've learned this lesson. I will not serve the golden calf or any facsimile thereof. I will protest like Hur and give my life if necessary. I will wait patiently for Moshe, or Moshiach, to come and put an abrupt stop to the party. When he calls out "Whoever is for God, come to me", I won't have to think about it, because I already have. I never stopped thinking, and I never will.

When this is all over, there will be a truly great party, the greatest party of all time, celebrating the final deliverance of the Jewish people and all mankind. It's worth waiting for, and it's worth fighting for. Those who cling to the golden calf are not invited.

I hope to see you there.